# The Present State of the Teaching of Government Publications in Library Schools

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CURRENT TEACHING of United States government publications in American Library Association-accredited library schools regards them in at least three ways: as members of the genre United States government publications, as representatives of various forms or types of publication, and as publications bearing upon this or that subject. The most common pattern is to touch lightly on documents in the required reference course and then to offer those students who desire further knowledge of them an elective course devoted specifically to them. In addition, government publications are touched upon as appropriate in the literature courses complex (humanities, social science, science, etc.). A few schools offer more than one required reference course. In these cases the reference courses may together include a relatively intensive coverage of documents and the elective documents course may not be offered.

The basic reference course is of particular interest in that it is the one place in which all library school students, even those not planning to go beyond the required core curriculum, are exposed to United States documents. Unless otherwise noted the statements about this course which follow are based on answers to a questionnaire completed by twenty-three instructors of the basic reference course, each representing a different A.L.A.-accredited library school; on general responses from most of the other accredited schools, in lieu of completing the questionnaire; and upon fifteen current course lists and outlines.

All basic reference courses at least touch on Federal publications; but several do not cover state documents and very few even mention local documents. An average of about two and one-half class hours

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is spent on Federal documents, one-half class hour on state documents, and practically no time on local documents. The Federal, state, local ratio is then about 30—6—1 respectively. Reference instructors are divided about evenly as to whether or not to teach government documents as a unit. The unit normally concentrates on the major bibliographic and selection tools for Federal publications. Even when a unit grouping is made, some documents are also presented at other appropriate points as examples of form or subject matter. For example, the *Statistical Abstract* is usually covered under some grouping such as "Handbooks" or "Statistics." For other illustrations the reader may consult Bonk's "Composite List of the Titles Taught in Basic Reference by 25 of the Accredited Library Schools" (1960)[1] and individual course lists. The teaching techniques used in basic reference for government documents do not differ significantly, if at all, from those used for other publications covered. An account of the utilization of school-made transparencies in teaching documents in basic reference appeared in print in 1960.[2]

Bonk's list and fifteen current lists sent to the author showed substantial agreement as to the most frequently taught document titles. Bonk's top twelve (irrespective of the reference category in which they happen to be listed) are given below. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of schools listing the title:

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (23)
2. *United States Government Organization Manual* (18)
3. U.S. Superintendent of Documents. *Monthly Catalog of U.S. Government Publications* (18)
4. *New Serial Titles* (16)
5. U.S. Congress. *Official Congressional Directory . . .* (16)
6. U.S. Library of Congress. *The Library of Congress Author Catalog* (16)
7. U.S. Library of Congress. *The National Union Catalog* (14)
8. U.S. Superintendent of Documents. *Price Lists* (14)
9. U.S. Library of Congress. Processing Department. *Monthly Checklist of State Publications* (12)
10. U.S. Superintendent of Documents. *Catalog of the Public Documents of Congress and of all Departments of the Government of the United States . . . 1893– . . . 1940* (12)
11. U.S. Library of Congress. *The Library of Congress Subject Catalog* (11)

12. U.S. Superintendent of Documents. *Selected United States Government Publications* (11)

All of these documents are Federal publications, although one is concerned with state publications. Two are handbooks (1 and 2), one is a directory (5), and all the rest are bibliographic and selection tools. Except for the *Statistical Abstract,* the consensus is not impressive.

Most accredited library schools offer a special course in government publications. Unless otherwise noted the numerical statements about this course which follow are based on answers to a questionnaire completed by twenty-one documents course instructors, each representing a different A.L.A.-accredited library school, and on information in library school catalogs. More general statements are based upon the above; on general responses from most of the other accredited schools, in lieu of completing the questionnaire; and upon current course materials from fourteen schools.

The documents course is most commonly titled "Government Publications" (20 schools) or "Government Documents" (7 schools). In every case it seems to be an elective. There may be no prerequisite, but it is more common to require the student to have taken basic reference. The course is given anywhere from one to three times per calendar year, with once or twice being the most common. The number of students taking the course each year depends on many different factors, including school size. The figure ranges from about one hundred to about a dozen. By comparing each figure with the corresponding school enrollment it is apparent that in only a relatively few cases is the course taken by substantially the entire student body. This finding leads one to wonder whether or not one identifiable type of student tends to take the documents course more than another. However, no evidence is available to date.

All but a few of the documents course instructors are full-time teachers. Their library backgrounds are quite diverse. About half a dozen have been involved directly and daily with depository collections to the extent that they might be called "documents librarians." The rest for the most part acquired their practical experience with documents through general reference work or technical processing. One of the part-time instructors is the Superintendent of Documents himself.

The documents course always emphasizes United States documents, and especially Federal documents. A few schools have a separate course for foreign and international documents. Far more often, how-

ever, they are covered in a few weeks at the end of the lone documents course—if there is time. The relative time devoted to various categories of documents in the documents course is given in Table 1 below. The center column represents the average percentage of the total time of the course devoted to each category, and the right column represents the same data in terms of a typical fifteen weeks' course:

TABLE 1

*Distribution of Time in the Usual Course by Type of Documents*

| *Type of Document* | *Percentage of Time* | *No. of Weeks* |
|---|---|---|
| U.S. Federal | 66% | 10 |
| U.S. State | 10% | 1½ |
| U.S. Local | 4% | ½ |
| Foreign and International | 20% | 3 |

The United States Federal documents section of the course tends to be organized more around the structure of government and form of publication than around academic subject area. There is usually a legislative-executive-judicial breakdown. Publications of the independent agencies may or may not be considered separately from the executive. In addition, there are nearly always sections of the course devoted to a general introduction to government publishing; to the major current and retrospective indexes, bibliographies and guides; to the organization and management of a documents collection; and to the study of the Superintendent of Documents' classification system. Beyond this there is considerable variation. The single most popular device is to consider statistical publications as a group, thereby cutting across both governmental and subject divisions. (An interesting approach to teaching government statistics has been described recently by Bonn.[8]) There is a scattering of Federal documents units built around form of material—for example, maps, handbooks and directories, and periodicals and report literature. Finally, some schools do have a few course subdivisions based on traditional subject lines. The relative time devoted to various categories of Federal documents in the documents course is shown in Table 2 below. The center column represents the average percentage of the total time spent on Federal documents devoted to each category, and the right column expresses the same data in terms of a typical fifteen weeks course, with ten weeks devoted to Federal publications. It should be emphasized that

these are average results, and that for a few courses the legislative-executive-judicial breakdown might not be meaningful:

TABLE 2

*Distribution of Time in the Usual Course by Type of Federal Documents*

| *Type of Federal Documents* | *Percentage of Time* | *No. of Weeks* |
|---|---|---|
| Legislative Publications | 31% | 3 |
| Executive Publications | 36% | 3½ |
| Judicial Publications | 9% | 1 |
| Other Matters | 24% | 2½ |

For state documents the major general guides, indexes, bibliographies and checklists are always covered. Beyond this the coverage, if any, emphasizes the state in which the school is located and, perhaps, its more important neighbors. The single most popular individual-state category of publication covered is the state blue book or legislative manual. Other identifiable categories covered by at least a few schools are constitutions, legislative journals, laws (both session laws and codes), examples of executive publications, reports of special committees and commissions, and collected documents. Only seven of the twenty-one instructors completing the author's questionnaire indicate covering either state document management or classification. The most popular state classification was that of California,[4] used as a model or example in five schools, three of them in the eastern United States. Two schools study the Swank system.[5]

Since several schools do not even attempt to include county and municipal documents, and even the most sanguine estimate of time spent on them was one week, it is obvious that not much is covered. There is a fairly general attempt to cover the basic general handbooks, indexes, bibliographies and checklists. Beyond this, coverage is at best uneven. A few publications of the local city might be touched on, but more often not. Only five instructors indicate even mentioning local document organization and management. Two concern themselves with local documents classification, touching on Swank and Glidden.[6]

The teaching methods for government documents in the special documents course are similar to those used in other bibliography courses in library schools. Thirteen of the twenty-one instructors completing the author's questionnaire indicated that the students used a

particular textbook or textbooks. By far the most common one was Schmeckebier (11).[7] The only other two listed (four each) were *United States Government Organization Manual* and Boyd and Rips.[8] Nine of the instructors using textbooks require their purchase. In answer to the question, "What additional publications would be of aid in teaching government documents?" six instructors spoke for a complete revision and updating of Boyd and Rips. Other suggestions ran the gamut from a textbook or manual designed specifically for teaching documents to a revision of Jackson.[9]

Sixteen instructors assign their students readings above and beyond their textbooks. These readings range from journal articles to books such as that by McCamy.[10] In some cases they follow along with the material of the course, and in other cases they serve as the basis of a term paper or oral report. Ten instructors said their students write term papers, and thirteen said they give oral reports. The commonest technique is to require a topic with a different orientation from that of the main course presentation. The most popular topics listed were compiling a selected bibliography of documents relating to a particular subject (and sometimes also for a particular library situation), and the history, publishing policy and publications of a bureau-level agency. A more standard written assignment (sixteen of the twenty-one questionnaires) is a legislative tracing exercise. This consists of following through and recording in an orderly manner all action on a specific bill from the time it is introduced to the time it becomes a law. Instructors seem to be about evenly divided as to whether the student is assigned or chooses freely the bill he will trace. A third sort of written assignment popular with documents instructors (sixteen of the twenty-one) requires students to answer practice questions. This is done on a unit basis, rather than daily, averaging perhaps six or seven sets of questions per semester.

Fifteen instructors bring documents into class. They utilize multiple copies from time to time, but seldom bring in one copy for each student. Audio-visual techniques are utilized by seven instructors. Three use the overhead projector, two use charts and displays, and two show a few motion pictures. Many Federal documents are available in various microforms. Eight instructors require their students to use them. Those who do generally accomplish this by assigning practice questions whose answers demand the use of the microform. Of course in some schools (exact number unknown) no microforms of documents may be available. Two instructors state that they tell their students

about these materials even though they are not required to use them. Six instructors take their students on field trips to one or more non-campus documents collections. Two classes visit the local city's public library; two visit their state libraries; two visit neighboring universities; and one visits the Government Printing Office and various Washington, D.C., area Federal libraries. The primary purpose of these visits is usually to give the students a look at another documents collection—its scope, emphases and, particularly, how the documents are handled and organized. Seven instructors report that their students have the opportunity to work briefly in the documents division of the library. In most cases this work consists of processing a box or two of depository material.

Since the quality of the campus collection is an important factor in library school accreditation, it is natural to inquire as to the documents collection available for teaching purposes. Almost all library school campus libraries are Federal documents depositories. Of the twenty-one schools completing the questionnaire, six were complete depositories and three of them regional. All the rest but one were partial depositories, ranging anywhere from quite small to nearly complete. Fifteen of these campus libraries contained the major documents of the state in which the school was located. Nine schools indicated significant holdings of the documents of other states. Of these nine schools, four reported a strong collection of all fifty states. In the two of these four cases where details were given, the emphasis was on legislative journals and collected documents, with a scattering of departmental publications along subject lines. In those cases where only a few outside states were collected, the emphasis was on neighboring states. Seventeen instructors indicated that the major documents of the local city and county were available on campus. Five reported significant holdings of other local documents. It should be noted that the word "significant," which was used in the questionnaire, did not satisfy a few instructors. Nonetheless a fairly clear picture of the existing situation does emerge from the answers.

Practically all library school campus libraries have a central documents collection (but also considerable scattering of documents about the campus). Fourteen of the twenty-one completed questionnaires said that the Federal documents in the central documents collection were classified by the Superintendent of Documents' scheme. The alternatives, in order of frequency, were LC, Dewey and adaptations based on the Cutter table. The state documents were most often

classified by LC or Dewey, but individual libraries are also using Swank, the classification of their state library, or their own plan. Local documents are normally classified by LC or Dewey, although a few libraries do use Glidden, Cutter table adaptations, or their own inventions. Other administrative decisions of the library also have an effect on the teaching of government documents. Although most libraries do allow library school students direct access to the documents collection, four answers indicated that they did not. Only about half of the libraries allow the students to reshelve the documents they have used, and a couple of these suggest they do not.

In contrast to the documents courses, the primary arrangement within the literature courses tends to be by subject area. From a study of Bonk's "Composite Lists of Titles in the Humanities and Social Science Courses in Certain of the Accredited Library Schools" (1961),[11] as well as more recent course lists, it is apparent that humanities literature courses make very little use of United States documents. Those which are used are primarily LC indexes and bibliographies. Social science literature courses, on the other hand, make considerable use of government publications. In Bonk's list for "Political Science, Government and Law" documents receive particular emphasis. For example, the *Official Congressional Directory, United States Code, Congressional Record,* and *Biographical Directory of the American Congress* are taught by over half the schools responding to Bonk, and a half-dozen more Federal documents routinely covered in documents courses are close behind. In the list for "Economics," over half the schools teach the current *Census of Population* and the *Statistical Abstract,* with another half-dozen Bureau of the Census publications taught nearly as often. Most of the general Federal indexes and guides are found in the "General Works" list, but there does not seem to be much unanimity as to which are the most important. For "Education" and "Geography" the documents listed are fewer and more specialized. In Bonk's list for "History," and the one for "Social and Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, Archeology, Social Psychology, and Social Work," documents are hardly represented. Science literature courses (based on the current course material for nine such courses) make substantial reference to government publications, but the overlap with the documents course is less than for social science literature. An important type of document seldom covered in the documents courses, but nearly always covered in the science literature course, is patents.

Twenty of the twenty-one documents instructors completing the

questionnaire indicate no serious, formal, school-wide effort to coordinate the teaching of government publications. Although a certain amount of omission and overlap may be desirable, the evidence indicates some areas deserving of attention. It is, for example, quite possible for students in certain schools, by judicious choice of electives, to graduate without having been exposed at any point in the curriculum to several fundamental documents of the broadest possible reference significance, e.g., *The Congressional Record, United States Code, Public Papers of the President* (along with the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*), and *United States Reports.* In even the documents course, state and local publications receive scant attention. If the reason is lack of class time, the possibility of eliminating foreign documents from the course might be considered. It does seem probable that the average American library school graduate and his public are more likely to have use for the documents of their own state, county, or city than for those of Europe or Asia, or even of Canada or Mexico. The overlap between the social science literature and documents courses (particularly in the areas of political science, government, law and economics) seems of sufficient magnitude to merit review. For example, how many students take both courses?

The documents collections, the library regulations, the geographic setting, and the backgrounds of available instructors vary drastically from school to school. However, the current documents curriculum varies little from one to another, and takes little account of the strengths and weaknesses of individual schools. The lack of strength in many cases of the campus collections of Federal, state or local documents is a cause for concern. So are library regulations that do not allow library school students direct access to documents, do not allow them to reshelve documents, or do not require even a part of the Federal documents collection to be set apart and classified by the Superintendent of Documents' scheme. A few schools with poor campus library collections and regulations have powerful and convenient non-campus documents collections available to them; but most do not. For state documents, it might make better sense than the present generally casual coverage to offer an opportunity for genuine specialization by having special state documents courses offered at those few schools with powerful state collections available, a nearby and respected state library operation, and a well-qualified instructor (such as a competent person on the state library staff). Perhaps local documents specialization should also be offered at those few schools

with strong local documents collections (of their own or available in a local municipal reference library) and a highly-qualified instructor. Finally, it must be admitted that for study of Federal documents schools located in certain areas, especially around Washington, D.C., have some unique advantages. Here is, perhaps, another opportunity for genuine documents specialization.

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